Representations of Gender and Class in Contemporary Indian Theatre and Film

With Special Reference to

Tripurari Sharma's *Daughter-in-Law*

Vijay Tendulkar's *Kamala*

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*

Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*

Deepa Mehta's *Fire*

Nagesh Kukunoor's *Dor*

Shoojit Sircar's *Pink*

A SYNOPSIS

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Dress in sarees, be girl

Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook

Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in. Oh

Belong, cried the categorizers. (35-38)

- Kamala Das in *An Introduction*

In *Feminist Philosophies A-Z* Nancy Arden McHugh says, "Gender is the result of social institutions and is a learned behavior while sex is a biological category. Thus gender is a social construction and a product of nurturing while sex is a product of nature." (49). According to the Oxford Dictionary, gender is "the state of being male or female with reference to social or cultural differences."

The social constructs have played a crucial role in the creation of the typical image of women in the Indian society. Society sets certain behaviors and norms for a child which determine her/his gender. Along with gender, class also divides the society in different hierarchies. Pascal Gisbert, in his famous book *Fundamentals of Sociology* defines class as "a category or group of persons having a definite status in society which permanently determines their relation to other groups" (367).

Class is the indicator of a person's status in society. The factors which influence the class of a person are wealth, power, education, occupation, etc. The social stratification on the basis of class, existed in India since ancient times when the society was divided into four *varnas* ("class") i.e. *Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras*. In the post-independence era, people were divided into different classes like land owners, labourers and tenants. After independence, with urbanization and the rise in trade and commerce, the gap between rich and poor widened and the society was divided into three classes i.e. upper class, middle class and lower class. These exist even today.

A woman is the victim of all forms of social stratification of which gender and class affect her the most. A woman in Indian society is doubly marginalized first as a woman and second as a victim of these social stratifications.

The condition of women in India has undergone many changes over the past millennia. During the Vedic period, women enjoyed a higher status and a respectable position in the society. We have the examples of women scholars and philosophers like Gargi, Ghosha, Maitreyi, Apala, etc. Marriage was also not a forced institution; a woman had the freedom to choose the life partner and her choice was honoured too.

Since Vedic times, Indian mythology and culture preserved such notions according to which a man and a woman should be treated equally. Like, *Prakriti* ("woman") and *Purusha* ("man") are complementary to each other, the phrases like *Ardhangini* and *Ardhanariswara* hint at the man and woman forming a complete whole.

Gradually, with the passage of time, women lost their high status. In the *Smiriti* age, the status of women fell almost to that of a slave. *Manusmiriti*, an ancient Hindu text stresses upon woman's dependency on her male counterpart. According to it, a woman has nothing of her own, she depends upon her father before marriage, her husband after the marriage and her son in old age.

In India since ancient times, the practice of *sati*[1] was followed. During the Mughal Empire in India, the evil practices of *purdah* system, child marriage, polygamy, etc. dominated. Among the Rajputs in Rajasthan *Jauhar*[2] was practised. S.K De in *The Cultural Heritage of India, Vol.II*, opines, "to woman is assigned the care of the home. Family being her creation, her association with man in every sphere is stressed. Her unassociated individuality is ignored" (321).

[1] *Sati* is an old custom in which a widow was immolated alive on her husband's funeral pyre.
[2] *Jauhar* was the custom of voluntary immolation of wives and daughters of defeated Rajput warriors in order to avoid molestation by the enemy.

From 20 B.C. to 1800 A.D. i.e. for about two thousand years, the position of women steadily deteriorated. However, after 1800 A.D., many reformists challenged the harmful practices of the society. Ishwar Chand Vidyasagar advocated women's education and widow remarriage; Raja Ram Mohan Roy fought against the *sati* system; Swami Dayanand worked for abolishing child marriage and Jyotirao Phule with his wife Savitribai Phule took various initiatives to make education available to the women of India.

During the struggle for Independence the role of women was widely acknowledged. In response to Mahatma Gandhi's call, women came out of their homes to join the non-cooperation movement with Gandhiji. There is evidence that women like Begum Hazrat Mahal, Bhikaiji Cama, Savitribhai Phule, Sarojini Naidu, etc. participated in the freedom struggle and showed the quality of leadership. Despite being marginalized, women began to recognize their true potential.

Various factors including education, urbanization and better employment opportunities led to the improvement in the condition of women and gave them exposure to western ideas.

This assertion of individuality and realization of potential paved the way for the feminist movement in India. Feminism in India has been influenced by western feminist ideologies. Feminism is the awareness of women's suppression and exploitation in the society.

Karen Offen in the essay entitled "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach" says, "Feminism emerges as a concept that can encompass both an ideology and movement for sociopolitical change based on a critical analysis of male privilege and women's subordination within any given society" (151).

Feminism and other socio-political factors influenced literature as literature has deep roots in the society and its workings. Drama is a genre of literature and theatre is its practical form. The word "theatre" is derived from the Greek word *theatron* which means "seeing place". Theatre is a place where "we come together as a community to experience stories, to sit and really listen to another person's predicament, join in their pain and joy and agree or disagree with the choices they make in their lives" (Krasner xvii).

The beginnings of Indian English drama can be traced to Madhusudan Dutt's 1871 play *Is This Called Civilization*. In 1920s, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo and T.P. Kailasam took the central stage and after them, the tradition was kept alive by the dramatists like Manjeri Isvaran, G.V. Desani and Lakhan Dev. In the post-independence era, the dramatists who came to the forefront were Asif Currimbhoy, Pratap Sharma and Gurucharan Das. Now, in the contemporary era, Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Mahesh Dattani, Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad helped in the revival of Indian drama and made their significant contribution to it.

Much of Indian theatre was dominated by male dramatists and there were comparatively fewer women dramatists. Moreover, the image of women portrayed in early Indian English drama was stereotypical.

In India women dramatists got an impetus with the establishment of Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1952, the feminist movement and the experimental theater movements of the 1970s. These movements encouraged women dramatists to write and expose the hypocrisy prevailing in the society. In theatre, the role of IPTA (The Indian People Theatre Association), which was formed in 1943 and NSD (National School of Drama), which was established by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1959 cannot be

undermined. They provided a platform for women writers to express their feelings boldly.

Along with these, the organization of various theatre workshops and theatre festivals brought into focus various feminist issues and the societal taboos.

Street theatre[3] laid the foundation for the rise of women's theatre. Safdar Hashmi's *Aurat* is a famous street play performed in 1979 by the Jan Natya Manch (People's Theatre Front). With the popularity of street theatre, a new kind of theatre emerged which today is known as feminist theatre. It gives voice to the oppressed woman and reconstructs the mythical images of women.

After the 1970s, a number of women playwrights established themselves in the field of theatre. Some prominent female dramatists are Manjula Padmanabhan, Tripurari Sharma, Neelam Mansingh Chaudhary, Usha Ganguli, Poile Sengupta, Irpinder Bhatia, Sushma Deshpande, etc. Feminist theatre focuses on the exploration of the self.

This research is primarily focused on two female dramatists i.e., Manjula Padmanabhan and Tripurari Sharma, two male dramatists i.e., Mahesh Dattani and Vijay Tendulkar. The study will also include the films of Deepa Mehta, Nagesh Kukunoor and Shoojit Sircar.

Tripurari Sharma was born on July 31, 1956 in a middle class family of Kurukshetra, Haryana. Sharma chose theatre as a means to express and to liberate herself from the clutches of patriarchal society. Currently, she is working as professor of acting at the National School of Drama and has her own theatre company named Alarippu. She was awarded the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 2013 for her contribution to theatre.

[3] Street theatre is a drama performed on the streets typically in an informal or improvised manner. As a means of awareness it is deeply rooted in Indian tradition.

Sharma has written and directed many plays in both the languages i.e. Hindi as well as English. Some of her well known plays are *Kaath ki Gaadi (The Wooden Cart), Bahu (Daughter-in-law*), *Birsa Munda, Aks Paheli, Sazaa, Reshmi Rumaal. Daiyre*, etc. In her plays, Sharma deals with issues ranging from gender, class, culture, to other societal problems.

Bahu or *Daughter-in-law* (1979) was the first play written by Tripurari Sharma. In this play, she portrays the story of a conventional lower class woman who encounters various hardships after the death of her husband. When the play begins, daughter-in-law has no name and no identity apart from being a daughter-in-law but when her family throws her out of the house, she shows resistance. The play depicts her journey towards emancipation and identity.

Contemporary to Sharma, Manjula Padmanabhan was born in 1953 in Delhi, India. After her post graduation from Bombay College, she was associated with publishing and media houses. Initially, she worked as a columnist and as an illustrator. She got recognition through her comic strip *Suki*. With that she wrote many plays, short stories, novels and children books. She won the Greek Onassis Award in 1997 and the status of a reputed playwright on the international platform after her play *Harvest* (1997). Other important plays written by Sharma are *Lights Out* (1984), *The Artist's Model* (1995), *Sextet* (1996), *Harvest* (1997), etc.

Lights Out (1984), a play written by Manjula Padmanabhan is based on a real life incident which took place in 1982 in Santa Cruz, Mumbai. The play portrays the apathy and indifference of a society that looks upon rape and violence without doing anything to stop it. Instead of calling the police, Bhasker and his friend Mohan find sadistic pleasure in watching the rape taking place and take no preventive actions. The

silence of Frieda, the maid of their house highlights the class-conscious and gender-biased society.

It is seen that in contemporary Indian theatre, not only the female dramatists but many male dramatists also highlight the issues of gender and class in their plays.

Vijay Dhondopant Tendulkar (January 6, 1928 - May 19, 2008), a recipient of Padma Bhushan was born in Kohlapur, India in a Marathi family. His formative years and the experiences which he had with his father and brother helped him in choosing writing as a career. His father ran a publishing house and was a frequent visitor to the theatre where Tendulkar accompanied him. Tendulkar began writing at the age of six and at the age of 11, he wrote and directed his first play. He wrote most of his plays in Marathi language.

Tendulkar wrote more than 30 full-length plays like *The Vultures* (1961), *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967), *Sakharam Binder* (1972), *Kamala* (1981), *Kanyadan* (1983), etc. and many one-act plays. He also wrote screenplays of powerful social films like of *Manthan* (1976), *Aakrosh* (1980) and *Arth Satya* (1984).

The play *Kamala* (1981) written by Vijay Tendulkar, based on a real life incident reveals the miserable condition of a woman and the corruption in the society. In the play, a journalist named Jai Singh Jadhav purchases a lower class tribal woman named Kamala from the flesh market at 240 rupees and uses her story for his promotion. Sarita is Jai Singh's loyal Marathi housewife and he treats her like a slave. After witnessing the pathetic condition of Kamala, Sarita begins to question her own identity in Jai Singh's life thus beginning her journey towards emancipation.

A writer, actor, producer, director, Mahesh Dattani was born on August 7, 1958 in Bangalore in a Gujarati family. He began his writing career as a copywriter in an advertising firm. In 1984, he founded his own theatre group named Playpen. Dattani has

written and directed numerous plays which deal with tabooed subjects and serious issues like homosexuality, gender, domestic violence, child abuse, female infanticide, class, etc. Some of his well known plays are *Where There's a Will* (1988), *Tara* (1990), *Final Solutions* (1993), *Thirty Days in September* (2001), *The Big Fat City* (2012), etc. He is one of the bold and innovative Indian dramatists whose experimental dramatic techniques are universally acknowledged. Dattani is India's first playwright in English who was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1998. As a playwright, he is influenced by Vijay Tendulkar and Tennessee Williams.

In *Tara* (1990), Dattani delves deep into the psyche of his female characters to depict their repressed desires. He has portrayed them as victims of social structures. The story revolves around the physical separation of conjoined twins, Tara and her brother Chandan. The surgical operations benefit Chandan because he is a boy. Eventually, because of the complications Tara dies. The play highlights the gender discrimination in upper class society where people are still bound by the customs and traditions of the society where a male is preferred to female.

Theatre and film are powerful means of communication. Since ancient times, theatre has been a source of entertainment while in the 20th century with the advent of technology, film media rose and came into the public domain.

In 1895, Auguste and Louis Lumiere projected the world's first motion picture. The device which they used was a camera with film printer and a projector which they termed as "cinematographe".

Historically, theatre and film have been closely intertwined. In terms of themes and techniques there is much interconnection between the stage and the screen. The feminist approach to cinema questions the stereotypical roles assigned to women in cinema.

In 1902, cinema was established in India. Dada Saheb Phalke is known as the father of Indian Cinema. He produced the first silent full length film *Raja Harishchandra* in 1913. In 1920s the films based on mythologies and histories dominated Indian cinema. In 1931 the first sound film *Alamara* was released. Male directors like Bimal Roy, Satyajit Ray, Mani Ratnam, V. Shantaram, Jabbar Patel, Mrinal Sen, etc. dominated Indian cinema. The image of women depicted in Indian cinema in the 1950s, 60s and 70s was stereotypical.

Towards the end of the 20th century, the portrayal of women in Indian cinema saw some changes. Fatma Begum was the first woman director of Indian cinema who directed the film *Bulbul-e-Paristan* in 1926. Then, films like *Arth* (1982), *Mirch Masala* (1987), *Damini* (1993), *Mrityudand* (1997), etc. show the transformation of women from docility to assertion.

The progression in the portrayal of women in India cinema was slow but steady. By the 21st century, with films like *Astitva* (2000), *Lajja* (2001), *Dor* (2006), *Chak De India* (2007), *Fashion* (2008), *Queen* (2013), *Mary Kom* (2014) *Pink* (2016), etc. women took the center stage. Many female filmmakers also moved ahead in making their career in the film industry like Farah Khan, Gurinder Chadha, Simi Garewal, Mira Nair, Nandita Roy, etc. Deepa Mehta is one of the successful filmmakers of the 21st century.

Deepa Mehta was born in India on January 1, 1950. After her marriage to Paul Saltzman, a Canadian producer, she moved to Canada in 1973. She got divorced in 1983 and married David Hamilton. With Hamilton she founded Hamilton-Mehta Productions in 1996.

In Canada, she began her career as a writer. She wrote scripts for children's movies. In 1991, she produced her own first feature film, *Sam & Me*. Her second

feature film was *Camilia* which she directed in 1993. *Fire*, released in 1996 was her third feature film. The film was initially criticized for its explicit portrayal but later it won attention. Mehta became famous for her trilogy named *Fire* (1996), *Earth* (1998) and *Water* (2005).

Through her films, Mehta challenges the patriarchal social structures. *Fire* (1996) is Mehta's first part of the trilogy. The film revolves around the lives of two women, Sita and Radha. Radha fulfills her duty as a loyal wife while Sita challenges the traditions and customs of the society. Both the women lead unhappy married lives but finally rebel. The film also deals with issues of sexuality and lesbianism.

In Deepa Mehta's films, the women characters undergo a significant change. Through them, she challenges the traditional, stereotypical, hegemonic structures of society.

Other well known makers of Indian cinema are Rajkumar Shantoshi, Nagesh Kukunoor, Ketan Mehta, Rajkumar Hirani, Mahesh Manjrekar, Shoojit Sircar, etc.

Nagesh Kukunoor was born on 30th March 1967 in Hyderabad, India. He is a well known director, producer, actor and screenwriter. After his post graduation in Chemical Engineering, he studied the art of direction from Warehouse Actor's Theatre, Atlanta. His first film as a director was *Hyderabad Blues* released in 1998. The other well known films directed by him are *Iqbal* (2005), *Dor* (2006), *Aashayein* (2010), *Dhanak* (2016), etc. He has received numerous awards for his films including National Film Award and seven international awards. In the 21st century Indian cinema, Kukunoor is known for his significant contribution to it.

Dor is a 2006 Nagesh Kukunoor film starring Ayesh Takia, Gul Panag and Shreyas Talpade. The film depicts the subversion of woman's freedom in the tradition-bound Indian society. It is a story of two women of different classes and backgrounds-

Meera, a simple Rajasthani girl and Zeenat, an independent Muslim girl. Fate brings the two women together in a moment of crisis and with courage they fight against the odds to move towards emancipation.

Shoojit Sircar was born in Kolkata and completed his higher studies from Delhi University. He directed films like *Yahaan* (2005), *Vicky Donor* (2012), *Madras Café* (2013) and *Piku* (2015). He won the National Film Award for *Vicky Donor*.

In a country where misogyny is rampant, Shoojit Sircar's *Pink*, recently released on 16 September 2016, is a bitter indictment of a male mind-set that feels threatened by the newly emerging emancipated woman and reacts with aggression. The film focuses on a traumatic experience involving three women— Minal Arora, Falak Ali and Andrea Tariang whose decision to attend a rock concert one night sets off a frightening chain of events. The women represent the average working women in Delhi. In a class divided society it is the feudals who wield power, resulting in a failure of police and legislature procedures. What emerges as a ray of hope is the honest and rational Deepak Sehgal, who takes the role of the girls' lawyer. Ultimately, the film forces the audience to reconsider its assumptions that single working, friendly women who smoke or drink are not promiscuous or available. A woman always has a choice to say No!

A number of studies have already been done on contemporary Indian theatre and film, from the point of view of gender and class. However, none of them are very comprehensive.

The book entitled *Studies in Contemporary Indian English Drama* (1999) written by A. N. Dwivedi examines the contribution of the dramatists like Currimbhoy, Tendulkar, Karnad and Khushwant Singh to contemporary Indian theatre.

In the research paper entitled *Fire, Water and The Goddess: The Films of Deepa Mehta and Satyajit Ray as Critiques of Hindu Patriarchy* (2013) David F. Burton

focuses on the patriarchal attitude to women in Indian society depicted through Mehta's *Fire* and *Water* and Ray's *The Goddess*.

The research article entitled *Enslavement of Women in Vijay Tendulkar's Kamala* (2014) by Kavya B. discusses the status of women in Indian society with reference to Tendulkar's *Kamala* and how marriage as an institution enslaves them.

In the research article entitled *Psycho-Socio-Cultural Matrix of Women's World in the Selected Indian Women Writings* (2015) Dr. Jayshree Singh and Ms. Kamla Mali study Indian woman's world and her sufferings as expressed by women writers like Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Kamala Das and Manjula Padmanabhan.

In the research paper entitled *Issues of Gender Discrimination in the Play of Mahesh Dattani: Tara* (2016) Khushbu Trehan highlights that Dattani's plays deal with gender issues in the patriarchal society and his portrayal of evil social practices like gender discrimination in the play *Tara.*

None of the studies include Shoojit Sircar's *Pink* which has been released on September 16, 2016. This research will be a comprehensive study encompassing plays and films produced in the last four decades. It will also attempt to trace the differences in the approaches of theatre personalities like Padmanabha, Sharma, Tendulkar and Dattani and filmmakers like Deepa Mehta, Nagesh Kukunoor and Shoojit Sircar.

A comparative study of the selected plays of Padmanabhan, Sharma, Tendulkar and Dattani and selected films of Deepa Mehta, Nagesh Kukunoor and Shoojit Sircar with a view to assess their contribution to Indian theatre and film would be new and would yield interesting results.

The objectives of this study therefore are-

1. To explore the socio-political and economic factors that lead to gender and class discrimination.
2. To analyze the depiction of gender and class in the selected works.
3. To assess the dramatic and cinematic techniques used in the selected works and compare theatre and film as mediums of expression.
4. To assess the contribution of the selected dramatists and filmmakers to contemporary Indian theatre and film.
5. To compare the male and female perspectives keeping in view the depiction of the themes of gender and class in the selected plays and films.

The tentative chapter division is-

1. Introduction
2. Muffled Voices: A Feminist Study of Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* and Tripurari Sharma's *Daughter-in-law*
3. Depicting the Marginalized: Women's Predicament in Vijay Tendulkar's *Kamala* and Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*
4. Transforming Feminist Identities: Depiction of Hope in Deepa Mehta's *Fire,* Nagesh Kukunoor's *Dor* and Shoojit Sircar's *Pink*
5. Conclusion

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